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ABSTRACT

This paper reports and interprets the major findings of a study of 54 inner city private elementary schools in eight cities. The study, conducted during the 1978-79 school year by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, explores the schools' academic achievements; their growing appeal to low-income, minority families; the racial, religious and socioeconomic diversity of their students; and the financial sacrifices made by the families who use them. Also discussed are the financial problems now besetting private inner city schools. It is concluded that the continued existence of such schools is gravely threatened by present government education funding policies which refuse to provide assistance to low-income minority parents struggling to meet the rising tuition costs of private schools in their inner city neighborhoods. (Author/GC)

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A Paper presented by Virgil C. Blum, S.J., President, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Marquette University, American Educational Research Association Meeting, New Orleans Marriott Hotel, April 24, 1984.

MINORITY FAMILIES SACRIFICE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

"Minority Families Sacrifice for Quality Education" is a 3500-word paper presented by Virgil C. Blum, S.J., president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association held April 24, 1984, in New Orleans. In it, the author reports and interprets the major findings of the Catholic League's study of 54 inner city private elementary schools in eight major U.S. cities. Conducted during the 1978-79 school year, the League study documented the schools' academic achievements; their growing appeal to low-income, minority families; the racial, religious and socio-economic diversity of their students; and the financial sacrifices made by the families who use them. He also discusses the financial problems now besetting private inner city schools, and concludes that their continued existence is gravely threatened by present government education funding policies which refuse to provide assistance to the many thousands of low-income minority parents struggling to meet rising tuition so that their children can have a chance at quality education.

MINORITY FAMILIES SACRIFICE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

One of the most rewarding experiences of my career as an educator was the Catholic League's study of poor black and Hispanic parents with children in inner city private schools. These parents demonstrated what can be accomplished --even at the greatest personal financial sacrifices--in the education of their children under every conceivable disadvantage. Utter poverty. Limited educational background. Single-parent families. Dilapidated school buildings. Inadequate educational equipment and facilities. Meager financial resources.

Who are these parents? Why do they send their children to such inner city private elementary schools?

To get answers to these and other questions, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights did a study during the school year 1978-79 in 64 randomly selected inner city private schools in eight major cities: New York, Newark, Washington, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, New Orleans and Los Angeles. The 54 elementary schools that responded, all of which qualify to receive federal aid for low-income students, served a total enrollment of 15,312, of whom at least 70 percent were members of racial minorities.

Nearly 4,000 elementary school parents participated in the study by answering lengthy questionnaires. The information provided by the parents revealed, first, who they are--their religion and ethnicity, their economic status, their family structure,--and, secondly, how they perceived the education their children were receiving in the target inner city private schools.

Although nine of 10 inner city private schools are Catholic, almost one-third of the families with children in the target schools are Protestant. Of the black families, which make up slightly more than 55 percent of the sample schools' population, 53 percent are Protestant and 44 percent Catholic. Of the Hispanic families, which comprise 32 percent of the same schools' enrollment, 98 percent are Catholic and 2 percent Protestant. Of the white families, which make up about 8 percent of the sample schools' population, 92 percent are Catholic and 6 percent Protestant.

Perhaps the most amazing and question-raising finding of our study was the economic status of these inner city private school parents. Most of these families are making tremendous, if not most painful, financial sacrifices in paying a substantial portion of their family income in tuition to private schools. Fifteen percent of the responding families report annual incomes of less than $5,000; another 35 percent report incomes of from $5,000 to $10,000; 22 percent report incomes of from $10,000 to $15,000; 14 percent report incomes from $15,000 to $20,000; and another 14 percent report incomes over $20,000.

Let me try to put these family incomes into proper perspective. It should be noted that 72 percent of families with children in inner city private schools report annual incomes of less than $15,000. This constitutes a massive over-representation of low income families, since only 36 percent of all U.S. families have incomes of less than $15,000. More remarkable still is the fact that 50 percent of these inner city private school families live on less than $10,000 a year, in contrast to 27 percent of all U.S. families.

All but 14 percent of the respondents are members of families whose annual income was below the median income of U.S. families, which was just under $20,000 in 1978.

It is nothing less than astonishing to discover that of the 15 percent of all inner city private school families with an annual income of less than $5,000, 35 percent are unemployed and receiving welfare payments. Of the 35 percent of the families with an annual income between $5,000 and $10,000, 4 percent are unemployed and on welfare.

In our efforts to discover who inner city private school parents are, our study revealed, much to our amazement, that 35 percent are one-parent families with only the mother present, 1 percent are one-parent families with only the father present, 4 percent are families headed by one or both grandparents, and 60 percent are two-parent families with both mother and father present.

Why do these minority parents--poor, powerless, discriminated against by lawmakers and courts--why do they send their children at great personal sacrifices to inner city private schools? Why do they pay from $200 to $800 a year in tuition charges, when, down the street at a government school, taxpayers would spend an average of $2,500 a year for their child's education?

The greatest degradation of poverty is the unavailability of choice. Unlike middle and upper-income families, most poor families in America are suffering that degradation. In the education of their children they have no choice of religious and moral values, no choice of educational environment, no choice of dedicated and committed teachers, no choice of personal involvement in the education of their children. The state through discriminatory laws compels them to send their children to government schools. For them, indeed, the greatest degradation of poverty is the unavailability of an unpenalized choice of schools.

Why then do poor black and Hispanic inner city parents--denied a fair share of education tax dollars for tuition-payments in the schools of their choice--pay a substantial portion of their income in tuition to send their children to

private schools in old delapidated buildings, to schools with totally inadequate facilities and equipment, to schools with teachers grossly underpaid, and in which they themselves are expected to contribute labor and services?

In our Catholic League study, minority parents answered that question in a voice that was virtually unanimous: They send their children to inner city private schools because they want a better education, a quality education for their children. And by quality education, they mean an education that includes religious and moral values as well as rules and discipline, an education which instills in their children a sense of self-respect, self-worth and high expectations in their ability to achieve, an education in which they themselves can contribute labor and services.

I should like to give a case study of one of the schools in our survey, St. Leo in Milwaukee, to demonstrate the wisdom of the choice of the poor, black, generally uneducated parents who make great sacrifices to send their children to this inner city private school. I shall here update the findings of the Catholic League's study.

St. Leo closed as a Catholic school in 1970, became the Leo Community school, declined to 70 students, and was forced to close its doors. It reopened in 1977 with 280 students, 98 percent black, 90 percent Protestant, 85 percent qualified for free meals under the government-funded breakfast and hot lunch programs, and with a waiting list of 500 hopeful families.

All students, except those in grade one, were transfers from Milwaukee public schools. On admission all students were administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The Iowa Test was administered at the beginning and end of each succeeding school year. I should like to give here a comparison of the test scores of only one grade, the fifth graders in 1977 and the scores they achieved

in June 1981 as they finished the eighth grade. I think you will agree that the improvements were quite remarkable.

On entering St. Leo the fifth graders were 24 months below the national norm in vocabulary, and finished the eighth grade seven months above the norm; they entered 24 months below the norm in reading comprehension, and finished five months below the norm; they entered 9 months below the norm in spelling, and finished 24 months above the norm; they entered 13 months below the norm in capitalization, and finished 24 months above the norm; they entered 14 months below the norm in punctuation, and finished 21 months above the norm; they entered 20 months below the norm in word usage, and finished 8 months above the norm; they entered 12 months below the norm in mathematical concepts, and finished 7 months above the norm; and they entered 19 months below the norm in problem solving, and finished 8 months above the national norm.

Also indicative of the great achievements of the St. Leo transfer students is the fact that 15 of these eighth graders studied high school literature and 12 took high school algebra. And students in the primary grades too get off on a fast start: last year the primary graders averaged four to seven months above grade level in reading, and 50 percent of the children were reading one full year above grade level.

I do not wish to imply that St. Leo is typical of all inner city private schools.

Moreover, the survey found that 98 percent of the parents agree that their children talk about school in a positive vein, 73 percent said their children enjoy going to school, and 98 percent say their children had learned to read and write well in school. The strong overall approval, despite some disagreement, suggests to us that parents truly perceive that the inner city private schools have had a positive impact on the values and attitudes of their children.

In measuring the progress of students in academic subjects, we found that most of the schools used some kind of standardized tests in tracking performance. Because of the diversity of test instruments, we have converted the scores to a common scale of measurement to facilitate comparisons among schools. Our study found a considerable range in the performance of inner city private schools as measured by standardized tests. For example, in measurements of seventh grade reading ability, the median score was 41.8 normal curve equivalent, with the highest performing school at 56.3 and the lowest at 20.5. In math, the median score was 45.8, with the low at 3.7 and the high at 71.9.

Naturally the following question arises: Why the dramatic differences? Are they caused by the backgrounds of the families, the social and economic profiles of the various student bodies? Are they, in short, determined by factors outside the schools? Or do the schools themselves make a difference?

Our study of inner city private schools found that background factors do not overwhelm the effects of the schools themselves. In other words, even when family backgrounds are considered, the individual schools were found to make a difference.

The data indicate that school factors appear to actually compensate for family background deficits. For example, the data show that the school has the greatest impact on improving behavior for children from poor homes, with rather less impact on those from middle class backgrounds.

Also, it was found that teacher attitudes and experience at a school are important factors in determining whether a school performs well or poorly as measured by the standardized tests. Teacher experience is a factor that can be called "resource sensitive" because it could be affected by funding levels. Some schools have such poor salary scales that they are unable to retain experienced teachers.

But in schools with an open admissions policy, teachers need more than experience; they need an extraordinary willingness to sacrifice. The principal of Blessed Sacrament School in Newark said of her teachers: "There are a lot of children with problems at this school. The teachers are willing to work at the problems and to sacrifice their time. . . . Many stay after school two or three times a week to help kids with their homework or to counsel them." The principal of St. Mary's School in Newark underlined the importance of dedicated teachers: "You could have all the money you want, but I think parent involvement and a dedicated faculty who will come early, stay late and work in difficult situations are more important."

Helen Bowers who has a child at Holy Name in Washington, D.C. said: "It is very important that children know somebody cares about how much they learn and, more importantly, that they can love and are loved."

Treva Young, whose child attends St. Anne's in Newark, says of her school's admissions policy: "We pattern ourselves after Jesus. He didn't pick just the cream. He loved everyone." And the principal of St. Cyril's School in Chicago spoke of the admissions policy: "Most of the children we get are rejects. No one else wants them. We just take them as they are. We don't take them as a group. We take each one's problems individually. We tell them, 'You are somebody. No matter what you can do, you can do something, and you can build on it.' Of course, we have to teach them the basics, but we first try to teach them that they are human."

The achievements of St. Leo's students—entering on a first-come-first-serve basis and as much as two years below national norms in several subjects—point to the quality education provided by the school, and not to selectivity and exclusivity. This is important because knowing the kinds of students who are

admitted to inner city private schools helps us understand a great deal about any claims the schools make about being successful.

Rejecting the elimination of students through admissions policies or expulsions, inner city private schools attempt to create a distinctive educational environment. This approach, of trying to create a distinctive rather than an exclusive educational environment, is obviously a far more egalitarian way of dealing with the problem of selectivity.

The Catholic League study demonstrated that inner city private schools show only a modest propensity toward admission selectivity and almost no selectivity through expulsions. Rather, by emphasizing socialization, the schools are trying to create a distinctive educational environment through meeting the needs of their student bodies head-on.

Obviously, given their restricted resources, the private schools cannot be "all things to all people." Without some type of admissions standards private schools could neither maintain a distinctive climate nor shape a desirable educational product. What is seldom recognized, however, is that schools can be distinctive without being exclusive.

Even though most of the schools in our study are church-affiliated, we found that the schools were almost evenly split on the matter of giving preference to children with a certain religious affiliation. This was true for first time enrollees and for transfers from public schools. Because religious affiliation is not closely associated with class or racial status, it obviously should not be treated as an exclusionary policy, in any event.

Leaving aside the question of religious affiliation, roughly one-fourth of the schools in our survey used no admissions criteria whatever. Other selection criteria, in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned, are the parents' motivation, the child's perceived motivation, the child's academic

ability, and the child's behavior. The least frequently mentioned criterion was the family's standing in the community or neighborhood.

Primarily because of resource constraints, inner city private schools do tend to exclude children with special handicaps. In most cases, principals reported that they simply could not afford the special educational teachers or equipment to serve these children.

But perhaps the most striking finding of our survey was the degree to which the inner city private schools opened their doors to public school transfers, even in cases where the transfers were clearly not the most desirable or ideal students. The survey found that a vast majority (80 percent) of the schools reported that they accepted academically weak transfers frequently or sometimes. This tendency is less pronounced among pupils with discipline problems, but a majority (56 percent) of the schools reported they accepted such transfers frequently or sometimes.

The conclusion that inner city private schools are egalitarian was further confirmed by our findings that they rarely expel problem students. In 1977 (the last year for which complete data were available) fully 61 percent of the schools expelled not a single student. The pattern for the previous three years, 1974 to 1976, was very similar. Those schools which did report expulsions usually were found to have expelled only one student and in no case more than two in any year.

How then do these schools maintain standards of performance which permit them to carry out a distinctive mission?

Like all organizations which choose not to be too exclusive, the inner city private schools have taken on the goal of attempting to shape the behavior and attitudes of their pupils. Some organizations shape behavior primarily through

the use of informal norms, while others rely more heavily on rules. The schools in our study were found to employ both methods.

There exists in the private schools a broad and powerful consensus over goals and policies between the schools and the parents. There is a strong element of parental involvement and commitment to excellence. Both the parents and the school staff place a heavy emphasis on the child's acquisition of reading and writing skills, and both parents and teachers try to challenge the child to do his or her best.

Our survey found that 62 percent of the principals said their schools place a strong emphasis on discipline. But the schools also showed a marked sensitivity to contemporary social needs. Nearly 66 percent of the principals also reported an emphasis on the school's curriculum on ethnic and racial issues.

The strong involvement of parents in the education of their children also constitutes an important, if not central, factor in this process of socialization. Seventy-seven percent of the parents in our survey reported that the school encouraged their suggestions and 71 percent reported that the school requires their involvement. And, perhaps most important, 93 percent of the parents report that they are treated by the school as if their opinion matters.

This personal dimension of sharing appears to be what is distinctive about all of the schools in our sample and what makes their "socializing" role so effective.

It is important to understand that a policy of trying to mold and influence attitude and behavior rather than relying on a policy of exclusive admissions and expulsions is a far more difficult and demanding task. It requires a higher level of commitment on the part of teachers, principals and parents. But it is a policy which reflects the egalitarian and open traditions of the schools.

Who are the teachers and principals who provide the quality education for which poor black and Hispanic parents sacrifice so greatly?

The Catholic League study examined the attitudes of 339 teachers and 54 principals who responded to our survey. The teachers' training and experience contribute to the quality education sought by inner city parents. First, teachers in inner city private schools have credentials virtually identical to those of teachers in public schools. Ninety-six percent of the teachers in the target schools have a college or graduate degree. Ninety percent are state-certified or, in their opinion, meet all criteria for certification.

While the majority of teachers in the target schools, all of which have predominantly minority students, are white, a significant percentage (31 percent) are black, providing a needed role model for black students. While the percentage of Hispanic teachers in these schools is small (6 percent), this is attributable more to the small pool of available personnel than to a lack of recruitment.

It is surprising to learn that almost half (43 percent) of the teachers in our target schools are comparatively recent entrants into the field, reporting less than five years of classroom experience. In fact, about 11 percent were in their first year of teaching. About 17 percent have been in the classroom for five to 10 years, and about 40 percent have had at least 10 years of teaching experience. Our data, unfortunately, do not reveal how many teachers have more than 10 years' experience.

Not surprisingly, the teaching nuns and brothers have, as a group, spent far more years in the classroom than their lay colleagues. About three-fourths of the teaching nuns and brothers have more than 10 years of teaching experience, compared with only about one-fourth of the lay teachers. Conversely, more than

half (56 percent) of the lay teachers have less than five years' experience, contrasted with only 11 percent of the religious teachers.

These findings strongly support the hypothesis that religious and lay teachers contribute in different ways to these schools. Members of teaching orders, because of their greater teaching experience and longer tenure in their present schools, contribute to the stability and continuity of the schools, while the relatively less experienced lay teachers contribute more to innovation. Minority group teachers are about as likely to be experienced teachers as are the white teachers. They appear to fit the role, not of inexperienced innovators on the faculties of the schools, but of minority group members who help adapt the teaching methods to meet the needs of minority group children.

There is, however, a serious problem with the veteran-newcomer-teacher ratio. For a variety of reasons, there are today less than half as many teaching religious as there were fifteen years ago, and the number continues to decrease. Hence the nuns and brothers who provide the stability and continuity of the school while working at a near-subsistence wage, are not likely to be replaced with other experienced religious upon their retirement. Nor will they be replaced by veteran lay teachers because of the inner city private schools' inability to pay salaries sufficiently high to enable them to retain top-level lay teachers. Of all the teachers we questioned, nearly one-third had annual salaries in 1977-78 of less than $5,500 (80 percent religious) and only 13 percent had salaries of more than $9,500. When we considered only the salaries of lay teachers, we found that 41 percent fit the range of $5,500 to $8,000, and 30 percent were in the $8,000 to $9,500 range.

In inner city private schools, the average annual salary in 1977-78 was about half that of public school teachers, $7,654 compared with public school teachers' annual average of $14,617.

On closer analysis, the situation is worse than it first appears. Inner city private schools rely greatly upon single lay teachers who are beginning their careers—75 percent of them earn less than $8,000 and the average annual salary is $6,423. Although the salaries of married teachers are better, they still do not offer much of an incentive; the salaries of two-thirds of the married teachers cluster in the $5,500 to $10,000 range. Moreover, our data revealed that 70 percent of the lay teachers depended upon their teaching income as their sole or primary means of support.

A rapid turnover of lay teachers has been tolerable solely because of the relatively high proportion of veteran religious teachers. With their retirement and non-replacement, inner city private schools will have to pay higher salaries to retain more lay teachers who can give the school continuity, identity and serve as principals. Can inner city private schools pay such higher salaries? Dr. Thomas Vitullo-Martin found in his 1979 study [Catholic Inner-City Schools: The Future, 1979] of inner city Catholic schools that "the [Catholic] church appears to have reached its organizational limits for their support." The only alternative that remains is to raise tuition. What would be the impact of raising tuition? Recall that 50 percent of the inner city private school families have an annual income of less than $10,000, and 72 percent have an income of less than $15,000. When asked what effect a $15.00 monthly tuition increase might have on their decision to keep their child/children in the private school, most parents indicated that it would be an economic hardship. Only 36 percent said they could afford a $15.00 monthly tuition increase.

A combination of these and other circumstances undoubtedly accounts for the rapid closing of inner city private elementary schools. Using data provided by the National Catholic Educational Association, Vitullo-Martin said inner city Catholic schools closed at a rate five times faster than did urban Catholic

schools--from a 1967 high of 1,490 to a 1973 low of 1,052, a 30 percent decrease in just six years.

This appears to be an irresoluble dilemma. If salaries are not increased to retain lay teachers--80 percent said they could easily get a better-paying teaching job--they will not stay and gain the experience to take over the roles of the retired nuns and brothers. If, on the other hand, tuition is raised even by as little as $15.00 per month, a large proportion of poor black and Hispanic parents will be forced to withdraw their children from inner city private schools.

To pose this cruel dilemma is to show that inner city poor black and Hispanic families are victims of a repressive, heartless and insensitive democracy, particularly in the decisions of the Supreme Court. For many thousands of poor families, the only school in which their children can get a quality education is in inner city private schools. They want the freedom to choose these schools. But when they exercise that choice guaranteed by the First Amendment, they are penalized: they must pay twice for the education of their children--once by taxes and again by tuition. Hence, most are compelled to send their children to inner city government schools that are, more often than not, blackboard jungles, 42 percent of whose "graduates" are functionally illiterate, and thus condemned to a life of unemployability and welfare dependency.

Penalizing these poor black and Hispanic parents who want a quality education for their children is disastrous public policy and is violative of their human and constitutional rights. And the policy is in contradiction to the policy applied to the older brothers and sisters of the children in inner city private elementary schools. For to some 2.7 million minority college students, the federal government in its Basic Educational Opportunity Grants program

gives grants of up to $1,800 a year—and thousands of them attend highly sectarian colleges.

In an effort to remove this penalty on the exercise of a constitutional right, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan introduced legislation in 1980 to provide family choice in education for low-income families. He sought to extend the benefits of B.E.O.G. to low-income families who pay tuition in elementary and secondary schools, covering up to half of tuition. The program was especially designed to help poor families, with 95 percent of the proposed benefits going to families with an annual income of less than $15,000. Seventy-five percent of the parents who send their children to the target schools in our study would have benefited by the passage of the Baby B.E.O.G. legislation.

When Moynihan's Baby B.E.O.G. bill came up for a vote in the U.S. Senate, it was overwhelmingly defeated. The vote was heartless, repressive, and highly insensitive to the educational needs of poor black and Hispanic families. It effectively sentenced thousands of our most disadvantaged and deprived children to inner city government "jungle" schools.

Government education policy today is designed to deprive poor, powerless black and Hispanic families of the most important choice they will ever make—the choice of school for the quality education of their children. This repressive policy will ensure the continual existence of an under-class of black and Hispanic citizens—largely dependent on government subsidies for their subsistence, and that of their families—for generations to come.